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ABSTRACT

With the passage of the 1996 welfare reform law, numerous commentators expressed concern about the impact of welfare reform on young children of welfare recipients, while few expressed concern about adolescents. However, recent evidence suggests that adolescents are affected negatively when their parents participate in welfare-to-work programs. This research brief describes these negative impacts and explores possible explanations for the unexpected findings. Findings are presented from three experimental evaluations conducted in Canada, Minnesota, and Florida of welfare-to-work programs established before 1996 but including some of the reform law's key components. Negative effects included declines in achievement as well as increases in troublesome behavior such as smoking, drinking, drug use, and delinquent activity. Possible explanations for the findings are suggested and examined: (1) eroded adolescent-parent relationship quality; (2) decreased parental monitoring; and (3) shifting adolescent role in the family. The data provide some evidence that participation in welfare-to-work programs may lead to increased negative parenting behavior, limited evidence of small decreases in parental supervision, and evidence for a broader shift in adolescents' roles in the families, with adolescents taking on more adult-like roles. The brief concludes with key issues for policymakers to take into account when considering policies to support adolescent development in families affected by welfare reform, including establishing more after-school programs for adolescents, reducing the number of hours that adolescents work, and providing guidance to parents about levels of adolescent responsibility and autonomy. (Contains 25 endnotes.) (KB)

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By Jennifer L. Brooks, Ph.D., Elizabeth C. Hair, Ph.D., and Martha J. Zaslow, Ph.D.

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July 2001

With the passage of the 1996 welfare reform law, numerous commentators expressed concern about what "ending welfare as we know it" would mean for the young children of welfare recipients. These children, after all, would be experiencing significant changes in their everyday lives as their mothers, who had relied on public assistance to support their families, entered or prepared to enter the work force. However, little concern was expressed about how the adolescent children of welfare recipients might fare as a result of the changes ushered in by the historic new legislation.

Despite the expectation that older children would be relatively less affected by welfare reform than their younger counterparts, recent experimental evaluations of welfare-to-work programs suggest that the adolescent sons and daughters in welfare households are indeed affected when their parents are assigned to participate in these programs. What's more, it seems that these young people may be negatively affected by this participation.

In this Research Brief, we describe these negative impacts and explore the possible explanations for these unexpected findings in light of available data and the research literature on child development. We conclude with key issues for policy makers to take into account when considering policies to support adolescent development in families affected by welfare reform.

This brief is one of a series being prepared by researchers at Child Trends to help inform the public debate surrounding the 2002 reauthorization of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, the centerpiece of the 1996 welfare law.

INITIAL EXPECTATIONS

The debate around and passage of welfare reform in 1996 led many to wonder how poor children and families would make out under the new law, which had an increased emphasis on work, increased support for working families, and time limits for welfare receipt.

Experts on children and families expected that children who were not yet of school age would be most affected by the new work requirements for their parents.[1] This expectation seemed obvious: As parents in welfare households increased their participation in the work force, these very young children would now be spending less time at home with their mothers and more time in other child care arrangements. Experts also expected that young children would be affected particularly strongly by any improvements in family economic well-being that resulted from their mothers' increased earnings and employment benefits.

On the other hand, those following welfare reform gave limited attention to how older children of adult recipients would be affected by the new law. A few individuals emphasized that adolescents would benefit from having an employed parent as a role model or that they would be harmed by the lack of supervision resulting from parental employment.[2] Others focused mainly on how teen *parents* on welfare might be affected by the

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The Canadian Self-Sufficiency Project[4] – Welfare recipients were randomly selected to participate in this program (for the sake of evaluating the program) or to be in a control group that received benefits under Canada's traditional public assistance program. Those in the Self-Sufficiency Project had a year to decide if they wanted to leave Canada's traditional welfare assistance program and participate in a three-year welfare-to-work program. Those participating in the program received a substantial amount of income to supplement their earnings if they worked at least 30 hours a week.

The Minnesota Family Investment Program[5]– Welfare recipients who were randomly selected to participate in this program were required to participate in at least 30 hours of employment or training services once they had been on welfare for a period of 24 months. (The sample was divided into those who had already been on welfare for 24 months at the start of the program and those who had not). Those who did not meet these participation requirements were sanctioned (i.e., they lost a portion of their welfare grant). The program allowed participants to keep many more of their welfare dollars when they went to work (whereas otherwise every dollar earned led to a dollar less in welfare benefits), provided their Food Stamps allotment in the form of a check, provided child care supplements paid directly to the provider, and helped with transportation and other work-related expenses.

The Florida Family Transition Program[6]– Welfare recipients who were randomly selected to participate in this program were required to participate in employment or training for at least 30 hours a week, with threat of sanction for those who did not. The program allowed participants to keep a modest amount of their welfare benefits when working, and provided intensified case management as well as an additional year of transitional child care once recipients had left welfare. The program also involved a time limit on the receipt of cash assistance, with a limit of two or three years, depending upon the recipients' prior history of welfare receipt.

new law, and not on the law's impact on adolescents who lived with a parent or parents who received welfare benefits.

UNANTICIPATED RESULTS

Recent research calls into question the initial expectations that older children would be relatively unaffected by welfare reform. We looked at data from three rigorous experimental evaluations of welfare-to-work programs conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. Though established before the 1996 welfare reform law, these programs included some of the law's key components. (Thus, the programs can be viewed as precursors to welfare-to-work initiatives implemented under the new welfare law.) In these studies, the adolescent children of parents enrolled in each program were compared with a control group of adolescents in welfare households in which parents were not enrolled.

The data from these three evaluations give indications that such programs may be having negative effects on the adolescent children of adult recipients. These findings have occurred despite increases in family income and favorable effects on younger children in some of these programs.[3] And they have occurred in the face of both mandates and financial incentives to work, and in programs with and without time limits on welfare receipt.

What were some of the specific findings about how parental assignment to these programs affected adolescents[7] in the households involved? Compared with adolescents in each study's control group:

- Adolescents with parents enrolled in the **Canadian Self-Sufficiency Project**[8] showed increases in smoking, drinking, drug use, and delinquent activity; increases in the likelihood that teachers called home about their school behavior; and decreases in school achievement.
- Adolescents with parents enrolled in the **Minnesota Family Investment Project,**[9] likewise, showed a decline in school achievement. Their parents were also more likely to receive calls from teachers about their adolescent's school behavior, although this occurred only among

families who had recently entered the welfare system when the program started.

- Adolescents with parents enrolled in the **Florida Family Transition Program** not only showed a decline in school achievement but also were more likely to be suspended from school. Even more troubling, an increase in arrests, convictions, and involvement with police was found among adolescents in one particular group of families – those headed by mothers who had worked more and spent less time on welfare at the start of the program.

We need to keep three important qualifications in mind. First, the effects documented in these studies are not dramatic in size. For example, 26 percent of adolescents in families involved in the Canadian program reported they smoked, compared with 22 percent of adolescents in the control group, a difference of only 4 percentage points. Second, none of the programs had negative impacts on all aspects of adolescent behavior that were examined. For example, neither the Minnesota nor the Canadian program led to an increase in adolescents' repeating a grade in school, and the Florida program had no impacts on whether adolescents had been expelled from school or placed in special education classes. Third, some of the most serious findings occurred only among certain families, such as those on welfare for shorter periods of time or with more work history. In the Florida program, for example, only adolescents in this group of families were more likely to have involvement with the police.

Still, there are compelling reasons to pay careful attention to these findings. They occur across all three programs. And they occur in areas that are important for adolescents' future. For example, findings show decreases in school achievement and increases in risky behaviors.

THREE POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

In this *Research Brief,* we suggest three possible explanations – hypotheses – for why these programs might be affecting adolescents negatively.[10] The first two hypotheses focus on significant aspects of parenting behavior known to be important for adolescent development. The third hypothesis extends beyond the first two to focus on the role that adolescents play in helping their families adjust to new circumstances. Because this third hypothesis has not been discussed elsewhere, we give it our fullest attention here.

After presenting each hypothesis, we then offer a preliminary look at some of the findings from the evaluations of the three welfare-to-work programs to see if there is evidence supporting each of the hypotheses. First, though, we offer a caveat. Since the evaluations of the three programs typically emphasized younger children, we have only limited data on adolescents and their families from which to draw our conclusions. We are able to rely on data about adolescents' families from the Canadian program, which collected more detailed information about adolescents' lives than the other evaluations. However, data pertaining to adolescents' families and daily lives are unavailable in the Minnesota and Florida evaluations. As a result, we draw inferences from the data collected for younger children (ages 5 through 12) in these two evaluations.[11]

Hypothesis 1: An erosion in the quality of adolescent-parent relationships. Parents assigned to these programs may be parenting their adolescents less effectively, either as a result of their employment per se or through such factors as increased stress and decreased energy.

Research shows that *how* parents respond to their children is important to their development. Warmth in parenting (such as conveying affection physically or emotionally, or praising the child) and consistency in discipline (such as holding fast to the rules that are set for the child) are generally related to better functioning in children and adolescents. Likewise, less harsh parenting (that is, involving less physical punishment and less yelling at or threatening of the child) is related to better well-being in children and adolescents.[12] So, to the degree that these three programs are leading to less "favorable" parenting behavior toward adolescents, they may be leading to negative impacts on these young people.

> **What the evaluations found:** Parents enrolled in the Canadian program reported an increase in their use of harsh parenting

directed at older adolescents (ages 15-18). Parents who had only recently begun receiving welfare at the start of the Minnesota program reported increases in their use of harsh parenting directed at younger children. (No data were available on the parenting of adolescents in this evaluation.) None of these programs affected parents' use of warm parenting, such as showing affection or praise, with their children.

Hypothesis 2: A decline in parental monitoring. These programs may leave parents with less time and energy to monitor their adolescents' behavior. This decreased monitoring may account for some of the increases in problematic behavior we see among young people with parents assigned to participate in welfare-to-work programs.

Parental monitoring is important at all ages of childhood. However, because adolescents spend more time away from their families, more time without adult supervision, and more time with their peers than younger children, this aspect of parenting is especially important for those making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Parents who monitor their adolescents' activities – knowing who they are with, where they are, and what they are doing – are more likely to notice if their adolescents are getting into trouble. These parents are also more likely to be able to intervene, by implementing curfews or setting rules about where their adolescent children can go and with whom. Indeed, higher levels of parental monitoring are generally related to lower levels of delinquent or problem behaviors and higher levels of academic achievement in adolescents.[13]

What the evaluations found: Two of the three programs had an effect on parental monitoring, although only one of these impacts was in the expected direction. Enrollment in the Florida program led to a slight *decrease* in parents' supervision of younger children. This was seen primarily in the group of families whose mothers had worked more and spent less time on welfare at the start of the study – the same group for whom the most severe impacts on adolescents (e.g., contact with police, arrests) were found. In contrast, enrollment in the Minnesota program led to *slightly more* parental supervision of younger children among families who had been on welfare for longer periods of time at the start of the study. However, monitoring in these evaluations was examined only for younger children, not adolescents, so our ability to gauge how these programs affect this behavior is very limited.

Hypothesis 3: A shift in adolescents' roles within their families. Adolescents in families that are making the transition from welfare to work may be more likely to assume adult-like roles, assisting their parents in critical ways within their households. Increasing adolescents' level of responsibility in this way may be a deliberate step that families take in order to adapt to the new circumstances that they face as a result of welfare-to-work programs. Still, this shift may have negative consequences for some adolescents.

As a developmental period, adolescence is defined as the transition from childhood to adulthood. During this stage of life, a person's role in the family, and in society more broadly, changes from that of a dependent child to an independent adult. Adolescents gain both greater freedom from parental control and greater responsibility for themselves and others as they grow older. They are typically allowed more say about decisions affecting their lives and more freedom in deciding how to spend their free time. At the same time, they are often expected to make more "adult" contributions to the family – such as providing care for younger siblings, paying for the clothes they buy, and taking more responsibility for household chores.[14]

The increased level of responsibility in adolescence is likely to be particularly important for families in which a parent is making the transition from welfare to work. Parents in these families may have less time to complete household chores and greater need for someone to watch over their younger children before and after school. These parents also may experience more stress as they try to balance their responsibilities at work and at home. In these circumstances, they may call upon their older children to take on more everyday tasks in order to ease parents' own transition into their new roles. Some

adolescents may volunteer to do so without prompting from their parents, if they sense that their parents are overburdened. Either way, adolescents might provide greater assistance with household chores, care for siblings, or take on a job to help with the family finances. At the same time, adolescents might provide emotional support to their parent, helping the parent with major family decisions or acting as a confidante when the parent is feeling depressed or stressed.[15] (Assumption of more adult roles by adolescents has also been well-documented among children whose parents are adjusting to divorce or struggling with depression or alcoholism.)[16]

Taking on more family responsibilities may be accompanied by greater freedom from parental authority. As parents recognize that their adolescent is now playing a more "adult" role in the family, they may view the adolescent as more mature and provide him or her with levels of autonomy that are closer to those enjoyed by adults. But while a certain degree of responsibility and autonomy is considered beneficial to adolescents, too much may jeopardize adolescent well-being. For example, research on adolescents suggests that:

- Extraordinarily high levels of autonomy can be related to higher levels of delinquent behavior and lower levels of academic achievement;[17]
- Extensive levels of responsibility for the family may lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety among some adolescents, who may feel overwhelmed by their responsibility;[18]
- Adolescents' perception that they have adult levels of responsibility and are therefore "grown" may cause problems with their teachers, who treat them – and expect them to behave – like children;[19] and
- Teenagers who think of themselves as adults may feel that it is appropriate for them to experiment with behaviors that are more characteristic of adults but more problematic in adolescence, such as smoking, drinking, and having sex.[20]

Moreover, evidence exists that adolescents in "higher risk" situations (such as poor, urban families) are even more sensitive to the consequences of high levels of responsibility and autonomy than their "lower risk" peers.[21] Given the overrepresentation of these "higher risk" groups among welfare recipients, even relatively modest increases in adolescents' responsibility and autonomy may result in problems for some adolescents as their families move from welfare to work.

> **What the evaluations found:** Adolescents in the Canadian program were performing household chores (including sibling care) slightly more frequently than adolescents whose parents were not assigned to the program, suggesting that their parents were perhaps relying on them more to help out with family tasks. Further, these adolescents were more likely to be working 20 hours or more a week, perhaps indicating that they were contributing economically to their families or had greater autonomy in their lives outside of the family.[22] This relatively heavy workload could be significant, since some research has suggested that this level of employment among adolescents may lead to increased problematic behaviors, such as drinking and delinquent activities, as well as to lower school achievement.[23] Further, the evaluation of the Florida program shows that participation in the program increases the likelihood that younger children in these families were cared for by a sibling.

Overall, then, the data – limited and preliminary though they are – are at least partially consistent with all three of our possible explanations for these impacts of welfare-to-work programs on adolescents.

SUMMARY

Our analysis leads us to conclude that welfare-to-work programs appear to be having some unfavorable impacts on the well-being of adolescent children of adult recipients, even in programs with favorable effects on younger children and increases in family income. These negative effects show up in decreased academic achievement, as well as increases in

troublesome behavior, such as drinking, smoking, and delinquency. Moreover, these effects are especially concentrated among adolescents from families that have been receiving welfare for a shorter period of time or in which the parent had more work experience in the past.

Parents' participation in a welfare-to-work program appears to affect adolescents' lives in a number of ways. There is some evidence that participation in these programs may lead to increases in harsh or negative parenting behavior and more limited evidence of small decreases in parental supervision. Both of these results might help to explain the programs' negative impacts on adolescents. Yet, the impacts of these programs on adolescents' lives extend beyond parenting behaviors to the behaviors of adolescents themselves. Overall, the evidence suggests that there may be a broader shift in adolescents' roles in their families in response to these programs, with adolescents playing a more "adult-like" role, taking greater responsibility for family tasks.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

In light of our analysis of the research findings, policy makers might want to consider a number of complementary approaches to lessen the potentially negative effects of welfare reform on adolescent children of adult welfare recipients:

- Target efforts to decrease the number of changes in adolescents' lives when their parents move from welfare to work. This might involve allowing parents greater flexibility (without fear of being sanctioned for noncompliance) to choose jobs that would not leave them dependent upon, or without supervision for, their adolescents. It might also include limiting the number of work hours required to fulfill the mandates implemented under welfare reform.
- Establish more after-school programs for adolescents to increase the degree to which they are engaged in "productive" activities when unsupervised by their parents.
- Provide better access to and financial support for child care for younger children to minimize the degree to which parents are turning to their adolescents to care for their younger siblings.
- Reduce the number of hours that adolescents work, an approach that should perhaps be considered in light of families' need for adolescents' financial contributions. If adolescents' earnings are vital to family survival, it might be important to combine this policy with increased income supports, such as the state and federal Earned Income Tax Credits[24] or financial incentives for adolescents to put their time and energy into their schoolwork.
- Provide guidance to parents about the issue of levels of responsibility and autonomy for adolescent children, with the goal of decreasing situations involving very extensive reliance on adolescents to help their families. Yet, in providing such guidance, it will be important to consider whether the family is relying on adolescent children out of need, rather than out of preference, and to include consideration of families' cultural beliefs about children's roles.

For such recommendations to be effective, they should be informed by a realistic understanding of the circumstances facing many families as they move from welfare to work. For instance, based on the assumption that the negative impacts on adolescents resulted from decreases in parental monitoring, a recent study recommended expanding after-school activities and programs for adolescents whose parents are leaving welfare.[25] However, while after-school activities may generally be beneficial, increasing the availability of such programs is not likely to alter the effect of welfare reform on adolescents if their employment or family responsibilities make them unable to participate.

Clearly, further research is needed to confirm the negative effects of welfare-to-work programs on adolescents and to establish the causes of these effects. The remedies are not likely to be simple. This *Research Brief* suggests that we need to extend our focus beyond issues of how parents supervise and relate to their adolescents. We also need to be concerned about the degree to which adolescents are taking on "adult-like" roles to assist their families. Adolescents are *not* adults, and taking on adult roles prematurely or too extensively may be harmful to some. At the same time, there is a growing recognition that adolescents' contributions are often critical to the

day-to-day functioning of families as they make the sometimes-difficult transition from welfare to work.

Just as more than one explanation needs to be considered for the recent findings on adolescents, so more than one approach may need to be taken to support adolescent development in the context of welfare reform. Indeed, different families may benefit from different approaches or a combination of approaches. A key consideration for policy makers as the reauthorization of welfare reform gets under way will be how to support *both* the positive development of adolescents in families receiving welfare *and* the economic self-sufficiency of their parents.

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Endnotes

[1]Zaslow, M.J., Moore, K.A., Morrison, D.R., & Coiro, M.J. (1995). The Family Support Act and children: Potential pathways of influence. *Children and Youth Services Review, 17*, 231-249; LeMenestral, S.M., Tout, K., McGroder, S.M., Zaslow, M., & Moore, K. (1999). An overview and synthesis of the project on state-level child outcomes. A report prepared for the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation; Child Trends (1999). Children and welfare reform: A guide to evaluating the effects of state welfare policies on children. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

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[3]For a review of the impacts on younger as well as older children, see Zaslow, M., Brooks, J., Moore, K., Morris, P., Tout, K., & Redd Z. (forthcoming). An analysis of experimental studies of welfare reform and children. Washington, DC: Child Trends; Zaslow, M., Brooks, J., Moore, K., Morris, P., Tout, K., Redd, Z., & Emig, C. (forthcoming). Experimental evaluations of welfare reform and children. *Future of Children*.

[4]For the full report on child impacts, see Morris, P., & Michalopoulos, C. (2000). *The Self-Sufficiency Project at 36 Months: Effects on Children of a Program that Increased Parental Employment and Income*. Ontario, Canada: Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, available at www.srdc.org.

[5]For the full report, see Knox, V., Miller, C., & Gennetian, L.A. (2000). *Reforming Welfare and Rewarding Work: Final Report on the Minnesota Family Investment Program*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, available at www.mdrc.org.

[6]For the full report, see Bloom, D., Kemple, J.J., Morris, P., Scrivener, S., Verma, N., & Hendra, R. (2001). *The Family Transition Program: Final Report on Florida's Initial Time-Limited Welfare Program*. New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, available at www.mdrc.org.

[7]For ease of presentation, we use the term "adolescent" throughout this discussion to refer to *adolescent children* of parents receiving welfare, not *adolescent parents* who are receiving welfare.

[8]The authors of this study had some concerns about response rates for adolescent-reported data in the Canadian Self-Sufficiency Project. However, the impacts on adolescents occurred on variables reported by the mother as well as those reported by the adolescent, giving us greater confidence in the results.

[9]We discuss only the full Minnesota Family Investment Project program – that with both financial incentives and a mandate to work. A second version of the program, with only financial incentives to work, was also evaluated, but data are not available for adolescents whose parents were assigned to this version of the program.

[10]A fourth possibility is that these findings are due to family moves (or simply adolescents' negative response to change) associated with these programs. A similar pattern of negative impacts on adolescents and positive impacts on younger children was found in the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experience, an experiment providing low-income families the opportunity to move out of public housing. See Ludwig, J., Duncan, G., & Ladd, H. (2001). The effect of MTO on Baltimore children's educational outcomes. *Poverty Research News, 5*, Joint Center for Poverty Research. However, there is little evidence of increased moving in the adolescents' families in the evaluations discussed here.

[11]It is important to note, however, that these programs might affect parental behavior toward younger children and adolescents differently. However, as there is little data on behavior toward adolescents, we will examine the data on younger children in these studies and use it, albeit cautiously, to infer how these programs might alter adolescents' lives.

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